

“Why Can’t I Recycle My Margarine Tub?” ...Recycling 101

Recycling coordinators are often asked about recycling items that the local recycling program does not collect. People often generate plastic grocery bags, margarine tubs, green glass, and other items as waste and think they should be recycled. Several conditions need to be met before anything can be recycled.

First, there must be a market for the material. Without a market, there is no reason to collect a material for recycling. If a community collection program is accepting a wide variety of materials for recycling but no one wants it, then there is a lot of wasted time and effort in getting this clean and sorted material to the landfill or incinerator for disposal. The reason that corrugated cardboard, newspaper, #1 and #2 plastics, etc., are commonly collected materials, is that there is a recycling infrastructure—processors and manufacturers—who want these materials and make them into products that are sold for profit. Without this infrastructure—or market—recycling cannot be sustained. That is why it is so important that consumers, whether they are buying for their homes or businesses, buy recycled products whenever possible. Only by creating a need for recycled material will markets grow for collected recyclable materials.

If there is a system in place for using collected materials, the next thing that is needed is having enough volume of a material to make it worth collecting and transporting to market. Recycling has a bottom line that goes beyond the environmental benefits. The more uncontaminated* material there is, the more likely there will be a system in place to process it and make it into a usable product. For example, a company may need to invest millions of dollars to purchase and set up the equipment to process a certain type of plastic so that it can be used by a product manufacturer. If the company is not sure it will be able to rely on a steady supply of the material or is not sure the processed material can be sold to a product manufacturer, it is unlikely it will invest the money to set up the equipment. However, if a company can make a profit from recycling a certain material, jobs will be created, more funds will be available in a community through wages and taxes, more resources and energy will be conserved, and a variety of other economic and environmental benefits will result. (Recent economic reports have been published supporting these benefits. See the Michigan Recycling Measurement Study at www.michiganrecycles.org/a_projects_measure.shtml, or the United States Recycling Economic Information Project at www.epa.gov/jtr/econ/rei-rw/rei-rw.htm.)

Regarding those margarine tubs ... if a market is available for that type of #2 plastic, the tubs will be collected for recycling. Although margarine tubs are labeled #2 (high density polyethylene, HDPE) they are not recyclable with other #2 plastics such as milk jugs and other narrow-necked containers. The difference is the type of #2 plastics used to make these items. Margarine tubs are made by injection molding and milk jugs are blow-molded. The difference in the plastics to be used in these two different technologies makes them incompatible in the recycling process.

*Contamination does not necessarily mean ‘dirty’ but can mean material that is mixed with other recyclable or non-recyclable material. There is a growing trend to collect all kinds of recyclables together to get a larger volume of usable recyclables. It is debatable whether it is more effective to have the material sorted out by the generator or by the collector or processor. Eventually the material has to be sorted to provide a large volume of uncontaminated commodity.